The Specialist List in Orthodontics: a postmortem

P. Cook, Chairman, SAC in Orthodontics

It is now more than one year since the Specialist List in Orthodontics closed on 30 June 2000. I therefore felt it appropriate that I should give my views on the list, having probably had more experience in this process than any other dentist in the UK.

As of 25 June 2001, there were 982 specialists on the Orthodontic List in the UK. Many of these had been entered onto the list by 'direct entry', having fulfilled the entry requirements as laid down by the General Dental Council (GDC). These applications did not involve the Joint Committee for Specialist Training in Dentistry (JCSTD), the parent body of the Specialist Advisory Committees (SAC). However, the majority of applications to the Orthodontic List were processed by 'mediated entry' and I personally, along with the Assessment Panel in Orthodontics, looked at all the applications from 847 individuals. Of these, 655 were recommended for entry to the Specialist List (77%). During the transitional period, a number of applicants were invited to sit the MOrth examination at one of the Royal Surgical Colleges. Of the 11 applicants who chose to test their expertise, nine were successful and have since entered the Specialist List by re-applying before the transitional period closed.

Towards the end of the transitional period, an unprecedented number of applications were received by the GDC and forwarded to the JCSTD. Many of these were from general dental practitioners (GDPs) with a special interest in orthodontics but with no formal qualifications or training. The experience of these individuals varied enormously, many stating that they were merely applying out of fear of having their orthodontic practice limited by the Department of Health if they were not on the Specialist List. This fear was later allayed by the new Chief Dental Officer, Dame Margaret Seward, in a letter to the Chairman of the SAC, published in a recent British Orthodontic Society Newsletter.

Since the closure of the transitional period, four individuals who had their applications rejected by the GDC have appealed to the Royal College of Surgeons. These appeals are chaired by a specialist from another area and two orthodontic specialists, including the Chairman of the SAC. To date, of the appeals heard, three have been dismissed and two are pending.

A further 50 individuals have appealed to the GDC. This appeal process is chaired by the Director of Appeals, a retired judge, with two dental specialists, neither of whom are orthodontists. To date, of the nine orthodontic appeals that have been heard, seven have been upheld and two have been dismissed. A further 41 appeals are waiting to be heard. In all, a total of 91 appeals have been heard at the GDC for all specialties: of these 66 have been upheld (73%) and 25 dismissed (27%). A further 144 are awaiting hearing.

Much has been written about whether the appeals process is a fairer assessment of the situation and whether the GDC, along with the JCSTD, had 'got it wrong in the first place'. Having been involved in the process for all of the applications for mediated entry to the Orthodontic List, and having been involved in the Royal College appeals, and having sat on many appeals panels at the GDC, excluding of course those for orthodontics, I have a clear view on where the difficulties may lie.

There is no doubt that both the GDC and the SAC would do things differently given this opportunity again. Where is the justice in an appeals system where only the appellant has a voice, whilst those that made the original decision are denied access to that appeal? However, I do feel that the SAC has made all efforts to try to be as fair as possible to all of those who applied to go onto the Specialist List in Orthodontics. Many of the applications from GDPs contained a wealth of information on their postgraduate

activities, yet much of this experience was in the field of general dentistry and although these dentists demonstrated a high level of commitment to postgraduate dental education and training, it was not necessarily of a specialist nature.

Orthodontics is different. We have had a well-established and well-respected training pathway and career structure for over 50 years. There has been a Royal College Examination in Glasgow since 1948 and the DOrth at the Royal College of Surgeons of England since 1949. Therefore, anyone currently undertaking orthodontic treatment either as a specialist practitioner or as a GDP with a special interest in orthodontics has had the opportunity to undertake formal training within the UK. They have not been prevented from doing so because such training did not exist at the time, unlike many of the new developing specialties of periodontics, prosthodontics, endodontics, etc. However, because of the process of law, all appeals to the GDC for entry to a specialist list have, I feel, been treated the same. This may be correct in law but is it producing the outcome many of us within the specialty feel is correct?

Where do we go from here? We have to accept that not everything in life is fair. Those of us who are on the Specialist List may feel aggrieved that certain individuals chose not to pursue a formal training in orthodontics have, through the appeals process, been gained entry to the Specialist List in Orthodontics. However, I urge all specialists registered on the Specialist List in Orthodontics to welcome those who have been deemed by the appeals process to be equivalent for specialist status. It is incumbent upon us to welcome these individuals and work with them to develop our specialty in a unified manner. But I also urge those who have gained entry to the Specialist List by the appeals process to join the British Orthodontic Society and not to create some form of splinter group with divergent views. In a few years time the upheaval of the Specialist List will be forgotten and from now on all specialists entering the List will have undergone a formal training leading to a CCST, essentially the only way to specialist status.

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